

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 SSO-00 NSCE-00 INRE-00
USIE-00 SSM-03 IO-13 EA-10 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05
H-01 INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02
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O R 161515Z NOV 77
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TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1734
INFO AMCONSUL ALEXANDRIA
AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV IMMEDIATE
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
USMISSION SINAI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 CAIRO 19100

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (SUMMARY)

EO 11652: GDS
TAGS: EG IS
SUBJECT: THINKING THE UNTHINKABLE: EGYPTIANS' REACTION TO
SADAT VISIT TO ISRAEL

SUMMARY: SADAT'S QUICKLY-MATERIALIZING TRIP TO KNESSET BECOMING
PSYCHOLOGICAL EQUIVALENT OF OCT WAR AND FORCING EGYPTIANS
TO THINK ABOUT THE UNTHINKABLE. EGYPTIANS WERE UNIVERSALLY
ASTONISHED BY NOV 9 OFFER, BUT AS SUPPOSEDLY SYMBOLIC GESTURE
BECAME DISTINCT POSSIBILITY THEIR ATTIDUTES CHANGED TO
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WIDESPREAD SUPPORT FOR SADAT'S POLITICAL AND PHYSICAL COURAGE
(EXTREMISTS WILL NOW BE LITERALLY GUNNING FOR HIM). OFT-HEARD
PHRASE IS THAT SCUCH DARING GAMBLE SUPPORTED BECAUSE EGYPTIANS
"FED UP" WITH COST OF CONFLICT. BEST INFORMED OFFICIALSE ARE,
HOWEVER, CLEARLY APPREHENSIVE THAT SADAT IS CONCEDING TOO
MUCH (E.G. JUST BY GOING ON "NATURE OF PEACE") AND UNLIKELY
TO GET ANYTHING FROM ISRAELIS IN RETURN. ALTHOUGH CRITICS

RECOGNIZE SADAT VISIT COULD BE HELPFUL TO CARTER ADMINISTRATION'S EFFORTS AND US PUBLIC OPINION, THEY ARE MUCH MORE CONCERNED ABOUT VIOLENTLY ADVERSE ARAB REACTION, PARTICULARLY IF SADAT COMES HOME EMPTY-HANDED. WITHOUT BEING OVERLY-DRAMATIC, IF SADAT ACTUALLY GOES TO ISRAEL IMPACT WILL BE GREATER IN DOMESTIC ARAB POLITICAL CONTEXT OF AMERICAN PRESIDENT VISITING HANOI AT HEIGHT OF FIGHTING IN VIETNAM AND DOMESTIC TURBULENCE. BURDEN IS NOW ON ISRAELIS AND US TO SEE THAT SADAT DOES NOT RETURN "EMPTY-HANDED" END SUMMARY

1. GENERAL REACTION. SEVERAL THEMSES RUN THROUGH REACTION OF MOST EGYPTIANS TO SADAT PROPOSED VISIT TO KNESSET. VIRTUALLY ALL WERE ASTONISHED. MOST AGREE IT IS COURAGEOUS AND DRAMATIC INITIATIVE. MEMBERS OF PEOPLES ASSEMBLY AND OFFICIALS, AFTER INITIAL SKEPTICISM ABOUT SERIOUSNESS OF OFFER, HAVE RALLIED BEHIND PRESIDENT AND MAINTAIN PROPOSAL HAS SUPPORT OF VAST MAJORITY EGYPTIAN PEOPLE WHO ARE "COMPLETELY FED UP" WITH ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT AND COST TO EGYPT. EVEN STRONG SADAT SUPPORTERS ARE, HOWEVER, CONCERNED ABOUT PERSONAL DANGER HE MAY FACE FROM EXTREMIST ARABS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE EGYPT. AS ONE OF HIS CONFIDANTS PUT IT: " IF HE GOES HE BETTER NOT COME BACK." THUS DECISION, IN THEIR VIEW, NOT ONLY TOOK GREAT POLITICAL COURAGE BUT PHYSICAL COURAGE.

2. SERIOUS RESERVATIONS. OFFICIALS WHO FOLLOW NEGOTIATING PROCESS ON DAY-TO-DAY BASIS ARE SHOCKED AND DEEPLY APPREHENSIVE
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THEY DO NOT SEE HOW PROGRESS TOWARD RESOLUTION OF TERRITORIAL WITHDRAWAL AND PALESTINIAN SELF-DETERMINATION CAN BE MADE DURING VISIT, AND THEY BELIEVE THAT, IF SADAT COMES BACK EMPTY-HANDED, IT WOULD BE "DISASTROUS". THEY RECOGNIZE POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT VISIT COULD HAVE ON AMERICAN AND WESTERN PUBLIC OPINION BY PUTTING ISRAELIS ON PROPAGANDA DEFENSIVE, BUT ARE CLEARLY MORE CONCERNED WITH ARAB REACTION. AL SOURCES SAY ARAB REACTION AT TUNIS FONMIN CONFERENCE WAS MILD BECAUSE THEY DID NOT THINK SADAT WAS SERIOUS. ADVERSE REACTION NOW COMING IN FROM RADICAL ARAB STATES. THEY ALSO SAY DIRECT CONTACT AT HIGHEST LEVEL WILL INDICATE FULL RECOGNITION EXISTENCE OF ISRAEL AND GOING TO JERUSALEM RECOGNITION OF IT AS CAPITAL ISRAEL (DESPITE FACT THAT IT TO BE SUBJECT OF NEGOTIATIONS). THEY ALSO FEAR POSSIBILITY OF DEMEANING INCIDENTS OR UPLEASANT EVENTS IN ISREEL THAT WOULD DETRACT FROM PRESIDENT'S PRESTIGE. ON POSITIVE SIDE, ONE SENIOR MFA OFFICIAL WHO ACCOMPANIED VP MUBARAK TO FRANCE SAID HE AGREED WITH FRENCH FONMIN GUIRINGAUD COMMENT TO MUBARAK THAT BY SINGLE STROKE SADAT HAD COMPLETELY UNDERMINED ISRAELI POSITION ON "NATURE OF PEACE" AS MAJOR CONDITION FOR SETTLEMENT. SADAT'S CRITICS WOULD CONCEDE THIS BUT SAY IT JAJOR CONCESSION FRO WHICH EGYPT UNLIKELY TO GET ANYTHING IN RETURN. ONE OFFICIAL CLOSE TO FAHMY TOLD POLCOUNS

ISRAEL MOST UNLIKELY TO CHANGE ITS HARLINE, LONG-STANDING POSITIONS JUST BECAUSE OF VISIT. (GUIRINGAUD ALSO TOLD MUBARAK THAT HE THOUGHT PRESIDENT'S KNESSET VISIT WOULD HAVE MAJOR IMPACT ON U.S. PUBLIC OPINION. KING HASSAN HAD TOLD MUBARAK THAT SADAT'S MOVE AN "ACT DE COURAGE POLITIQUE".)

3. SAUDI ROLE. MAY EGGYPTIANS ASSUME SAUDIS SUPPORT VISIT SINCE "SADAT DOEN'S DO ANYTHING WITHOUT SAUDI APPROVAL."

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4. ARAFAT REACTION. ARAB LEAGUE SOURCE QUOTED ARAFAT ON LEAVING PEOPLES ASSEMBLY AS SAYING: "I DON'T KNOW WHY SADAT DID THIS TO ME. I WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO CONVINCE MY COLLEAGUES THAT I DID NOT HAVE ADVANCE INFORMATION ABOUT THIS. THEY WILL THINK I ENDORSE SADAT'S PROPOSAL. WITH ALL MY OTHER TROUBLES I DID NOT NEED TO HAVE THIS ADDED." SOURCE SUGGESTED ONE OF SADAT'S GOALS IN MOUNTING THIS STRATEGY IS, IN FACT, TO PULL RUG FROM UNDER PLO. HE POSITED THAT IN ISRAEL, SADAT WILL WILL MEET WITH ARAB MAYORS FROM WEST

BANK AND GAZA, THEREBY EFFECTIVELY UNDERCUTTING PLO'S LEADER-
ROLE. ADDITIONALLY, SOURCE EXPECTS SADAT TO ENGAGE IN
PUBLIC PRAYERS AT AL-AQSA MOSQUE (DOME OF THE ROCK), THEREBY
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"FULFILLING KING FAISAL'S DREAM"

5. UNIVERSITIES. ATTEMPTS TO ORGANIZE DEBATES ON WISDOM OF
DIRECT DIALOGUE WITH ISRAELI LEADERS HAVE TAKE PLACE, MOST
NOTABLY IN POLITICALLY ACTIVE U OF CAIRO FACULTY OF ENGINEERING.
REACTING TO IRAQI BATH PARTY'S DENUNCIATION OF SADAT'S PLANNED
TRAVEL, ONE GROUP OF EGYPTIAN STUDETS REPOTEDLY COUNTERED
IRAQIS COULD AFFORTD TO BE REJECTIONIST: IT IS EGYPTIANS WHO
BEAR THE BRUNT OF BATTLE. THUS FAR, EFFORTS ON CAMPUSES HAVE
BEEN LARGELY UNSUCCESSFUL AND CROWDS SMALL. WALL POSTERS
DENOUNCING SADAT'S IMPENDING TRAVEL HAVE BEEN SWIFTLY REMOVED.
OUR CONTACTS SPECULATE THAT PALESTINIAN STUDENTS ARE BEHIND
BOTH EFFORTS. THEY HVE EXPRESSED APPREHENSION OVER SADAT'S
SAFETY DURING HIS CURRENT STAY IN DAMASCUS.

6. TWO PARTICULARLY ILLUSTRATIVE REACTIONS FOLLOW::

A. GOVT PARTY LEADER MAHMUD ABU WAFIA CONFIRMED SADAT
HAD NOT DISCUSSED PROPOSAL WITH CLOSE ADVISERS BEFORE DELIVER-
ING SPEECH. INITIAL REACTION OF VIRTUALLY ALL MP'S WAS COMPLETE
DISBELIEF. HOWEVER, WITHIN HOUR ALL EXCEPT "COMMUNISTS"
SUPPORTED IDEA. PARLIAMENTARIANS RECOGNIZE DANGER IF TRIP
NOY DUVVRDDGUL SNF ISRAELIS PROVE AS INTRANSIGNETN IN PRIVATE
AS THEY HAVE SOUNDED IN PUBLIC. IN THAT EVENT, THERE WILL
BE NO SENSE IN GOING TO GENAVA AND ARABS WILL HAVE TO PREPARE
TAKE MILITARY ALTERNATIVE. ONLY ARABS WHO ARE WORRIED ABOUT
INITIATIVE ARE THOSE WHO AFRAID HE WILL STRIKE BILATERAL
BARGAIN WITH ISRAELIS, BUT THERE ABSOLUTELY NO CHANCE PRESIDENT
WILL DO SO. RE IRAQ'S OPPOSITION, THIS POSITIVE SIGN SINCE IT
POSSIBLE PORTENDS SUPPORT FROM SYRIA, KWAIT, AND SAUDI ARABIA.
IN ANY CASE, IRAQIS HABITUALLY OPPOSED EVERYTHING, WHILE
CONTRIBUTING NOTHING.

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B. ARAB LEAGUE OFFICIAL, EGYPTIAN INTELLECTUAL GAMIL MATTAR, SAYS
HE AND OTHER ARAB DIPLOMATS IN CAIRO ARE "DIZZY" AS RESULT
RECENT DEVELOPMENTS. NEVER IN HIS LIFETIME DID HE EXPECT TO
SEE ARAB LEADER VISIT ISRAEL'S CAPITAL. MATTAR MAINTAINED
THAT FOUR THEORIES CURRENTLY IN VOGUE: (1) SADAT IS CRAZY;
(2) SADAT IS AMERICAN AGENT; (3) EGYPT POSSESSED DEFINITE IN-

FORMATION THAT ISRAEL WAS ON POINT OF LAUNCHING PREEMPTIVE STRIKE OR INTERVENING IN LEBANON IN FORCE; AND (4) SADAT'S PLOY DESIGNED SPECIFICALLY TO INFLUENCE AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION IN EFFORT FORCE CONGRESS TURN OFF ISRAELI PIPELINE. "THOUGHTFUL PEOPLE" DISMISS FIRST TWO THEORIES. DISCUSSION HAS CENTERED ON LATTER TWO WITH NO CONSENSUS EVOLVING. NONE ACCEPT SADAT'S OWN EXPLANATION THAT HE SEEKING OPEN WAY TO GENEVA. FAHMY REPORTEDLY OFFERED PREEMPTIVE STRIKE THEORY AS OFFICIAL EXPLANATION IN TUNIS. ALL ARAB LEADERS DISTRUST SADAT TO SOME EXTENT. ALL FEAR HE WILL NEGOTIATE HIS OWN BARGAIN IN ISRAEL ON SINAI, DESPITE DISCLAIMERS TO CONTRARY, AND THEY WILL BE LEFT TO CONFRONT ISRAEL ALONE. SADAT IN RREAL PHYSICAL DANGER, BOTH IN OCCUPIED TERRITORIES AND FOLLOWING RETURN TO CAIRO. REJECTIONISTS ARE OUT TO GET HIM.

7. COMMENT: WHETHER SADAT'S UNIVERSALLY RECOGNIZED "COURAGE" TURNS OUT TO BE PRODUCT OF FOOLHARDINESS OR WELL CALCULATED RISK WILL OF COURSE BE DETERMINED BY OUTCOME OF EXPECTED TRIP. HE HAS, IN ANY CASE, DEMONSTRATED BEYOND ANY DOUBT THAT HE IS PREPARED TO PUT HIS POLITICAL AND PHYSICAL LIFE ON THE LINE TO PROVE HIS COMMITMENT TO PEACE IN MIDDLE EAST AND TO FORCE OR ENCOURAGE OTHER LEADERS TO DO THE SAME. SUCCESS OF SADAT'S UNPRECEDENTED MOVE NOW RESTS WITH ISRAELI LEADERSHIP AN THAT OF OTHER MAJOR PARTIES TO CONFLICT.
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